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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL OUTREACH FOR EARTH DAY 2009 AND BEYOND

1. SUMMARY. Embassy Phnom Penh celebrated Earth Day 2009 through two outreach events that promoted environmental awareness and conservation and celebrated Cambodia's biodiversity. On April 22, the DCM discussed environmental challenges and participated in a community cleanup event with university and high school students in Kampong Cham. On April 25, the Ambassador hosted about 80 elementary school students for an Earth Day celebration at the embassy, where the students unveiled murals based on environmental drawings they had created. Outreach activities like these help to address the relatively low awareness of environmental issues in Cambodia and the impact that individuals can have on their surroundings. The embassy plans to continue reinforcing the important messages delivered in recognition of Earth Day through ongoing and future outreach activities. END SUMMARY.

STUDENTS DISCUSS CONSERVATION IN KAMPONG CHAM

2. On April 22, the DCM met with a group of approximately 60 university and high school students at the University of Management and Economics' American Corner in Kampong Cham Province to discuss environmental challenges and awareness in Cambodia. The students represented a mix of English Access Microscholarship recipients and members of the local English language club. The DCM, switching freely between English and Khmer, fielded questions about the importance of conservation, USG environmental programs in Cambodia, and how other countries were addressing environmental challenges. The DCM noted that as Cambodian citizens, the students were the owners of the country's natural resources, and he encouraged them to think about ways that they could help to protect those resources. Following the session, the DCM accompanied the students to Wat Nokor Bachey, an Angkorian-era temple outside of Kampong Cham town, to pick up litter and continue their discussions.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS CELEBRATE CAMBODIA'S BIODIVERSITY

3. On April 25, the Ambassador hosted almost 80 students from two local elementary schools and an NGO program for AIDS orphans and children suffering from HIV/AIDS at the embassy for a second Earth Day event celebrating Cambodia's biodiversity. Several weeks before the event, the students submitted drawings of Cambodian environmental scenes, which a non-profit Cambodian art school then converted into large, colorful murals using oil paints on tin roofing material. The Ambassador and the students unveiled the 6' X 6' murals at the event.

4. The students discussed their paintings with the Ambassador, played games with American and Cambodian embassy staff, and received Cambodia-U.S. friendship backpacks supplied by ODC with art supplies supplied by PAO in appreciation for their participation. Local journalists attended the event and interviewed the Ambassador on environmental challenges in Cambodia. The event received positive coverage in all the major Khmer-language newspapers and was featured on the highest-rated Cambodian television network.

MOVING BEYOND EARTH DAY

¶5. COMMENT: Environmental issues in Cambodia stem from RGC prioritization of development over conservation, lack of funding for basic services like trash removal, and low public awareness of environmental issues and the impacts, both positive and negative, that individuals can have on their surroundings. While the first two challenges are more difficult to tackle, promoting interest in environmental issues is a relatively simple and effective activity in Cambodia.

¶6. Embassy Phnom Penh plans to continue promoting the messages of environmental conservation and stewardship introduced in our Earth Day activities. For example, we are working with the Ministry of Environment to develop activities for Cambodian Environment Week May 31 - June 5.

¶7. The embassy also recently formed a Green Team to explore ways the mission can improve its own environmental footprint. Green Team members take turns writing environmentally-themed articles, which are posted on the embassy's website in English and Khmer. Ripple effects from this initiative have already been seen as one article on plastic bottle use has been featured in the country's highest circulation daily. END COMMENT.

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